

Chapter 3

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF BUDDHISM IN INDIA

Turning the Wheel of *Dharma*

Initially, the five ascetics with whom the Buddha had earlier practiced were reluctant to listen to anything that the newly enlightened Buddha had to say, regarding him as a weak-willed backslider. He had, after all, abandoned them and their ascetic practices. However, as they listened to him and absorbed the power of his spiritual transformation, their resolve dissolved, and they saluted him and offered him a special seat before them. This set the stage for the Buddha's first sermon. He began by telling them that he was no longer to be called "Siddhartha," but now was the Tathagata (the "thus gone one," which refers to his enlightened state), an *arhat* (one worthy of respect),

a perfectly enlightened being, and that he will share with them the insight that has allowed him to conquer death.

The first sermon—the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*, "the *sutra* of the turning of the wheel of *dharma*"—is one of the best known of all Buddhist texts (See From a Classic Text 3.1). It is both an extremely straightforward discourse and an extremely persuasive one. It is simple in structure and language, and lays out the foundation of all Buddhism. The Buddha begins by telling the ascetics who will become his first disciples, and therefore the first Buddhists, that the truth he has discovered is a middle path between extremes. At one end of the spectrum is the very sort of asceticism that he gained firsthand experience of,



FIGURE 3.1 *The Buddha preaching the first sermon at Sarnath. Here, the Buddha displays the dharmacakra mudra (teaching gesture).*

an extreme asceticism that amounts to, essentially, useless self-torture. At the other end is sexual and sensual indulgence, which simply leads to more grasping and, therefore, more

suffering. The middle path, he says, leads to self-knowledge, equanimity, awakening, and, ultimately, salvation (*nirvana*).

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 3.1

After the Buddha had attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya, he was hesitant to share the wisdom that he had realized, fearful that it would confuse his disciples rather than enlighten them. He is convinced, though, by Brahma and the other Hindu gods to share the dharma so that they, the gods, as well as all humans, can also obtain release from samsara. His first sermon is called, in Pali, the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, literally, the “turning of the wheel of dharma.” In this first sermon, the Buddha lays out the basic foundation of the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths.

Reverence to the Blessed One, the Holy One, the Fully-Enlightened One.

1. Thus have I heard. The Blessed One was once staying at Benares, at the hermitage called Migadaya. And there the Blessed One addressed the company of the five Bhikkhus, and said:

2. “There are two extremes, O Bhikkhus, which the man who has given up the world ought not to follow—the habitual practice, on the one hand of those things whose attraction depends upon the passions, and especially of sensuality—a low and pagan way (of seeking satisfaction) unworthy, unprofitable, and fit only for the worldly-minded—and the habitual practice, on the other hand, of asceticism (or self-mortification), which is painful, unworthy, and unprofitable.

3. “There is a middle path, O Bhikkhus, avoiding these two extremes, discovered by the Tathagata—a path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana!

4. “What is that middle path, O Bhikkhus, avoiding these two extremes, discovered by the Tathagata—that path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana? Verily! it is this noble eightfold path; that is to say:

Right views;
Right aspirations;
Right speech;
Right conduct;
Right livelihood;
Right effort;
Right mindfulness;
and Right contemplation.

“This, O Bhikkhus, is that middle path, avoiding these two extremes, discovered by the Tathagata—that path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana!

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5. "Now this, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning suffering.

"Birth is attended with pain, decay is painful, disease is painful, death is painful. Union with the unpleasant is painful, painful is separation from the pleasant; and any craving that is unsatisfied, that too is painful. In brief, the five aggregates which spring from attachment (the conditions of individuality and their cause) are painful.

"This then, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning suffering.

6. "Now this, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering.

"Verily, it is that thirst (or craving), causing the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there—that is to say, the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for (a future) life, or the craving for success (in this present life).

"This then, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering.

7. "Now this, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering.

"Verily, it is the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very thirst; the laying aside of, the getting rid of, the being free from, the harboring no longer of this thirst.

"This then, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering.

8. "Now this, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the way which leads to the destruction of sorrow. Verily! it is this noble eightfold path; that is to say:

Right views;

Right aspirations;

Right speech;

Right conduct;

Right livelihood;

Right effort;

Right mindfulness;

and Right contemplation.

"This then, O Bhikkhus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of sorrow.

9. "That this was the noble truth concerning sorrow, was not, O Bhikkhus, among the doctrines handed down, but there arose within me the eye (to perceive it), there arose the knowledge (of its nature), there arose the understanding (of its cause), there arose the wisdom (to guide in the path of tranquillity), there arose the light (to dispel darkness from it).

10. "And again, O Bhikkhus, that I should comprehend that this was the noble truth concerning sorrow, though it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

11. "And again, O Bhikkhus, that I had comprehended that this was the noble truth concerning sorrow, though it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

12. "That this was the noble truth concerning the origin of sorrow, though it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye; but there arose within me the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

13. "And again, O Bhikkhus, that I should put away the origin of sorrow, though the noble truth concerning it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

14. "And again, O Bhikkhus, that I had fully put away the origin of sorrow, though the noble truth concerning it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

15. "That this, O Bhikkhus, was the noble truth concerning the destruction of sorrow, though it was not among the doctrines handed down; but there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

16. "And again, O Bhikkhus, that I should fully realize the destruction of sorrow, though the noble truth concerning it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

17. "And again, O Bhikkhus, that I had fully realized the destruction of sorrow, though the noble truth concerning it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

18. "That this was the noble truth concerning the way which leads to the destruction of sorrow, was not, O Bhikkhus, among the doctrines handed down; but there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

19. "And again, O Bhikkhus, that I should become versed in the way which leads to the destruction of sorrow, though the noble truth concerning it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

20. "And again, O Bhikkhus, that I had become versed in the way which leads to the destruction of sorrow, though the noble truth concerning it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

21. "So long, O Bhikkhus, as my knowledge and insight were not quite clear, regarding each of these four noble truths in this triple order, in this twelvefold manner—so long was I uncertain whether I had attained to the full insight of that wisdom which is unsurpassed in the

heavens or on earth, among the whole race of Samanas and brahmins, or of gods or men.

22. "But as soon, O Bhikkhus, as my knowledge and insight were quite clear regarding each of these four noble truths, in this triple order, in this twelvefold manner—then did I become certain that I had attained to the full insight of that wisdom which is unsurpassed in the heavens or on earth, among the whole race of Samanas and brahmins, or of gods or men.

23. "And now this knowledge and this insight has arisen within me. Immovable is the emancipation of my heart. This is my last existence. There will now be no rebirth for me!"

24. Thus spake the Blessed One. The company of the five Bhikkhus, glad at heart, exalted the words of the Blessed One. And when the discourse had been uttered, there arose within the venerable Kondanna the eye of truth, spotless, and without a stain, (and he saw that) whatsoever has an origin, in that is also inherent the necessity of coming to an end.

(In *Buddhist Suttas*. Translated from Pali by T. W. Rhys Davids. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 11. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881.)

The Buddha then lays out what is really the doctrinal foundation of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths. This set of four truths is really a kind of basic blueprint, a kind of fundamental summation of the insight that the Buddha had gained in his enlightenment experience. Although Buddhist doctrine would become extremely complex as the tradition develops and as different schools—with different philosophical positions—emerged, each articulating increasingly intricate analyses of consciousness, perception, cognition, psychological states, and so on, the Four Noble Truths would remain the doctrinal bedrock of Buddhism.

The first noble truth posits that suffering exists in the world. This we see in the story of Siddhartha in the palace: the young prince is made aware that the world is not all wonderful—as it appears to be in the palace—but in fact that the rosy life is just an illusion. In his first sermon, the Buddha says that birth is *dukkha*, old age is *dukkha*, sickness is *duh-*

kha, death is *dukkha*; in fact, everything is suffering, including things that seem to be pleasurable. But *dukkha* is more than this: it is really the truth of the physical and mental discomfort that comes from not getting what one wants, or, conversely, from getting what one does not most wish for. Pleasurable experiences, for instance, engender suffering because they necessarily do not last, and so, when the experience is over, one is dissatisfied because one wishes for more.

It is important to note, however, that the first noble truth is not intended to engender a pessimistic worldview in Buddhists, but rather to alert them to the reality of the world and to promote a clear, truthful view of that world—to see it as being, essentially, in a constant state of flux and change. Furthermore, the response to the reality of suffering, as is clearly evident in the Buddha's own desire to realize and share the *dharma*, is not existential despair, but the cultivation of compassion (*karuna*) and kindness (*maitri*) to all living beings.

The second noble truth is the arising (*samudaya*) of suffering, which is fundamentally related to the basic Buddhist understanding of *karma* (see below), of cause and effect. Since suffering exists, the Buddha posits, it must have a cause, which is most simply expressed as *tanha*, thirst or desire.

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 3.2

The Dhammapada is a short canonical Pali text, which consists of 423 verses grouped into 26 chapters. Most of the verses in the text come from other sources. The text seems to have been intended as a kind of catechism, since it could easily have been learned by heart, and presents a basic overview of the Buddha's sayings, addressing fundamental issues such as, in this passage, thirst, or grasping. It continues to be one of the most popular of all Buddhist texts.

Chapter XXIV: Thirst

334. The thirst of a thoughtless man grows like a creeper; he runs from life to life, like a monkey seeking fruit in the forest.

335. Whomsoever this fierce thirst overcomes, full of poison, in this world, his sufferings increase like the abounding Birana grass.

336. He who overcomes this fierce thirst, difficult to be conquered in this world, sufferings fall off from him, like water-drops from a lotus leaf.

337. This salutary word I tell you, "Do ye, as many as are here assembled, dig up the root of thirst, as he who wants the sweet-scented Usira root must dig up the Birana grass, that Mâaa (the tempter) may not crush you again and again, as the stream crushes the reeds."

338. As a tree, even though it has been cut down, is firm so long as its root is safe, and grows again, thus, unless the feeders of thirst are destroyed, the pain (of life) will return again and again.

339. He whose thirst running towards pleasure is exceeding strong in the thirty-six channels, the waves will carry away that misguided man, viz. his desires which are set on passion.

340. The channels run everywhere, the creeper (of passion) stands sprouting; if you see the creeper springing up, cut its root by means of knowledge.

341. A creature's pleasures are extravagant and luxurious; sunk in lust and looking for pleasure, men undergo (again and again) birth and decay.

342. Men, driven on by thirst, run about like a snared hare; held in fetters and bonds, they undergo pain for a long time, again and again.

343. Men, driven on by thirst, run about like a snared hare; let therefore the mendicant drive out thirst, by striving after passionlessness for himself.

344. He who having got rid of the forest (of lust) (i.e. after having reached Nirvana) gives

himself over to forest-life (i.e. to lust), and who, when removed from the forest (i.e. from lust), runs to the forest (i.e. to lust), look at that man! though free, he runs into bondage.

345. Wise people do not call that a strong fetter which is made of iron, wood, or hemp; far stronger is the care for precious stones and rings, for sons and a wife.

346. That fetter wise people call strong which drags down, yields, but is difficult to undo; after having cut this at last, people leave the world, free from cares, and leaving desires and pleasures behind.

347. Those who are slaves to passions, run down with the stream (of desires), as a spider runs down the web which he has made himself; when they have cut this, at last, wise people leave the world free from cares, leaving all affection behind.

348. Give up what is before, give up what is behind, give up what is in the middle, when thou goest to the other shore of existence; if thy mind is altogether free, thou wilt not again enter into birth and decay.

349. If a man is tossed about by doubts, full of strong passions, and yearning only for what is delightful, his thirst will grow more and more, and he will indeed make his fetters strong.

350. If a man delights in quieting doubts, and, always reflecting, dwells on what is not delightful (the impurity of the body, &c.), he certainly will remove, nay, he will cut the fetter of Māra.

351. He who has reached the consummation, who does not tremble, who is without thirst and without sin, he has broken all the thorns of life: this will be his last body.

352. He who is without thirst and without affection, who understands the words and their interpretation, who knows the order of letters (those which are before and which are after), he has received his last body, he is called the great sage, the great man.

353. "I have conquered all, I know all, in all conditions of life I am free from taint; I have left all, and through the destruction of thirst I am free; having learnt myself, whom shall I teach?"

354. The gift of the law exceeds all gifts; the sweetness of the law exceeds all sweetness; the delight in the law exceeds all delights; the extinction of thirst overcomes all pain.

355. Pleasures destroy the foolish, if they look not for the other shore; the foolish by his thirst for pleasures destroys himself, as if he were his own enemy.

356. The fields are damaged by weeds, mankind is damaged by passion: therefore a gift bestowed on the passionless brings great reward.

357. The fields are damaged by weeds, mankind is damaged by hatred: therefore a gift bestowed on those who do not hate brings great reward.

358. The fields are damaged by weeds, mankind is damaged by vanity: therefore a gift bestowed on those who are free from vanity brings great reward.

359. The fields are damaged by weeds, mankind is damaged by lust: therefore a gift bestowed on those who are free from lust brings great reward. (*The Dhammapada*. Translated by F. Max Müller. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 10. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881, 80–84.)

This thirst takes many forms: the desire for life, for things, for love. Although on its face this, too, may seem to engender a pessimistic worldview, in which the individual must stifle all sensual pleasures, it is important, again, to stress that the Buddha advocates a middle path, between sensual indulgence and extreme asceticism. Pleasurable experiences should be experienced for what they are, without grasping. Indeed, the Buddha pronounces that it is precisely because humans mindlessly grasp things and experiences, always rushing to the next, that they fail to fully experience their lives, including that which is pleasurable. The point, then, is not to deny the sensual, but to fully experience sensations and thoughts, as they are happening.

Since suffering has a beginning, the Buddha posits, it must, logically, also have an ending: the third noble truth, then, is the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering. The end of *dukkha* is related to its source; *nirodha* comes as a result of ending craving, of stopping the grasping after things that are impermanent. When one stops grasping, one stops generating *karma*, and it is *karma* and *karma* alone that keeps beings trapped in *samsara*. The absolute elimination of *karma* is *nirvana*, eternal freedom from the bondage of *samsara*.

Of all Buddhist concepts, *nirvana* has perhaps been the most misunderstood. Although it is frequently equated with heaven, or described as a state of bliss, *nirvana* is actually the absence of all states. This Sanskrit word literally means, “to extinguish,” as one would snuff out a candle. Since *karma* is what keeps us in *samsara*, what constitutes our very being, the elimina-

tion of *karma* logically means elimination of being. This is the end of *dukkha*, the end of the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, beyond all states of existence. When the Buddha died, then, when his physical body expired, he did not “go” to *nirvana*, but rather ceased to exist, absolutely.

Despite the fact that *nirvana* is the Buddhist understanding of ultimate salvation, the Buddha himself had little to say on the topic, often warning his followers of the dangers of grasping on to the end goal at the expense of living a focused, compassionate life. He describes it as “the extinction of desire, the extinction of illusion,” and also as the “abandoning and destruction of desire and craving . . . that is the cessation of *dukkha*.” However, when asked once if *nirvana* were a state of existence or not, the Buddha responded that this was an unanswerable question, and left it at that. The point is that the focus should be on mindful progression on the path, not on the destination. The person who spends too much time obsessively focusing on *nirvana*—or on any aspect of existence or doctrinal complexity—is, the Buddha said, like a man who, upon being shot by a poisoned arrow, asks who shot it, how he aimed, what sort of wood it was made of, and so on. The man must first remove the arrow before the poison kills him.

That said, however, later Buddhist schools inevitably took up the question of *nirvana*, frequently engaging in long philosophical analyses of the possibility of describing it in positive terms, and in some Mahayana schools, which emerged sometime around

the first century C.E., *nirvana* is, in fact, often described as a kind of state of blissful calm.

Finally, the fourth noble truth is the existence of an eightfold path (*marga*, or *magga* in Pali) to religious realization, which consists of

1. Right understanding
2. Right intentions
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

On one level, this is a set of sequentially arranged steps: one must move from the first step on the path, Right understanding, to the final step, Right concentration. At the end of this path lies enlightenment, the conquering of suffering and death—*nirvana*. However, the Buddha also stresses that each of these steps must be embodied continually. In other words, one does not so much move from one step to

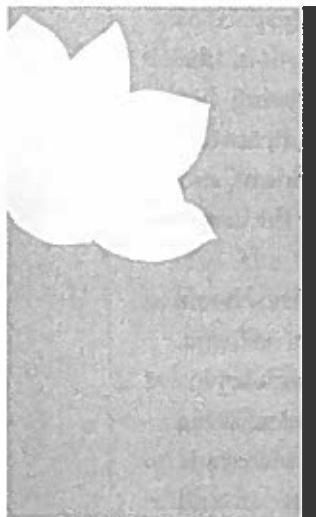
the next, but moves through them sequentially, always practicing what was mastered in the previous step.

The Eightfold Path is really a kind of practical overview of the path to enlightenment. The path is traditionally divided into three distinct phases, sometimes called “trainings,” that should, ideally, be progressively mastered. The first is *shila*, or ethics, and involves purifying one’s outward behavior (and motivations for such behavior). This is the first stage on the path because it is considered impossible to purify one’s mind without first purifying one’s actions. The Buddha describes three elements in *shila*: right action, right speech, and right livelihood. Next comes *samadhi*, or meditation, which is broken down, likewise, into three elements (the next three steps on the path): right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The third phase is *prajna*, or wisdom, and is broken up into right understanding and right intentions.

Personalities in Buddhism 3.1

MAHA MOGGALLANA

Maha Moggallana was one of the Buddha’s chief disciples, along with Sariputta, with whom he is closely associated. He was born on the same day as Sariputta, near Rajagriha, in a prominent brahmin family. He was converted by Sariputta who, having heard a stanza from Assaji, shared it with his friend Moggallana, who became a Stream Winner. The two then went to visit the Buddha at Veluvana, where the Buddha preached to them, and they were ordained as monks. On the seventh day after his ordination, Maha Moggallana sat in meditation and was overcome by sleepiness; the Buddha, however, exhorted him to persevere, and he attained arahantship the following day. The Buddha announced to the *sangha* that he had chosen Moggallana and Sariputta as



his chief disciples, much to the consternation of the other monks, who felt it unfair that two newcomers would be elevated to such lofty status. The Buddha told the assembled monks, however, that Maha Moggallana had worked diligently in his prior lives; he had previously been a householder named Sarada who gave away his wealth and became an ascetic. The Buddha had visited him in his hermitage, where Sarada and his seventy-four thousand pupils showed him great honor, and Sarada had made a vow that he would become the chief disciple of some future Buddha.

Maha Moggallana is declared to be the ideal disciple by the Buddha, whose example others should follow. In the "Saccavibhanga Sutta," for instance, the Buddha says that Moggallana and Sariputta are "twin brethren": "Sariputta is as she who brings forth and Moggallana is as the nurse of what is brought forth; Sariputta trains in the fruits of conversion, Moggallana trains in the highest good. Sariputta is able to teach and make plain the four Noble Truths; Moggallana, on the other hand, teaches by his special powers (*iddhi*). With these powers, he could transform himself into any shape. When the Buddha and the other monks failed to receive alms in Veranja, Maha Moggallana offered to turn the world upside down so that the essence of the earth would come to the surface and serve as food. In another instance, the Buddha asked him to use his big toe to create an earthquake in order to frighten some monks who were talking idly in one of the monasteries. He also used his *iddhi* to subdue the evil naga Nandopananda.

Like Sariputta, Moggallana is celebrated in the Pali texts for his great wisdom. In one such instance, the Buddha preached to the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu, but wearied, asked Moggallana to instruct the monks on the finer points of the sermon. When the Buddha went to preach the *Abhidharma* in Tavatimsa, he asked Moggallana to preach to the people until his return.

Like Sariputta, Maha Moggallana died before the Buddha. According to the commentaries, his death was the result of a plot by the Niganthas. Moggallana had, during his life, used his powers to visit various worlds and returned to report that those who had followed the Buddha's teachings reached happy worlds, while the followers of heretics were reborn in hells. The heretics, seeing their numbers decreasing, bribed bandits to kill Moggallana. They caught and beat him, but he was able to drag himself to the Buddha to say goodbye before dying. Before passing into *nirvana*, however, he preached to the Buddha, and performed many miracles at his request.

Translating *prajna* as wisdom, however, is a bit misleading, because it is not just knowledge or things that one learns. Rather, it is a profound way of understanding being in the world. *Prajna* is often described as a sword that cuts through all illusion, a mental faculty that enables one to fully experience the world as it is, without grasping. A later school uses an image of geese reflected on a perfectly still pond to describe this state. The average person looks at the pond, and, upon seeing the reflection of a flock of geese, immediately looks up. But the person who has perfected *prajna* does not look up, but rather fully experiences the thing that he or she is seeing at the moment, the reality of the reflection, without distractions. In a sense, such a person does not think at all, but only sees the world as it is—as what the Buddha called *yathabhutam*—in a state of perpetual flux.

In the end, then, the Four Noble Truths, as laid out by the Buddha in his first sermon, present a remarkably clear summary of the doctrinal foundations of Buddhism.

Central Doctrines of Buddhism

As Buddhism gained followers, and monks began to form distinct groups, often united on the basis of doctrinal commonalities and matters of monastic discipline, Buddhism was marked by what really was a kind of doctrinal explosion. Over the course of the first few hundred years after the Buddha's death, and particularly at the beginning of the first few centuries of the Common Era, substantial new texts began to appear: commentaries on the

Buddha's sermons, texts devoted to monastic life, and entirely new texts claimed to have been hidden by the Buddha himself, which offered up philosophical and devotional ideas that seemed to move very far from the Buddha's original teachings. This doctrinal profusion is truly one of the hallmarks of Buddhism (some of the highlights of these doctrinal developments will be explored in more detail in a later chapter). This said, however, there are certain key doctrines shared by all Buddhists:

Samsara. Underlying virtually all of Buddhism is the doctrine of *samsara*, which Buddhism shares with Hinduism. *Samsara* is really a fundamental worldview or ethos, an understanding of the world, which holds that all beings, including animals, are part of an endless (and beginningless) cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. Furthermore, Buddhism holds that the physical universe is itself made up of infinite world systems, spread out infinitely in space, and that these world systems, like the individual person, are also subject to the cycle of birth and rebirth. It was, in many ways, the realization of the horror of *samsara* that led to the *Upanishads* and the *shramana* movements—attempts to find a way out of this endless cycle of rebirth.

The Buddhist view of the cosmos is predicated on *samsara*, and holds, as seen in Chapter 2, that there are both different world systems and also different realms that are arranged in a tripartite structure—the “sense-desire” realm at the bottom, above which is the “pure form” realm, and at the top, the “formless” realm. Within these three divisions are sub-realms into which a being can be reborn: the human realm, animal realm, hungry ghost (*preta*)

realm, various hells, and, higher up, *deva* (divine) realms. Although it is not the highest realm, the human realm is considered the most promising because in this realm there is both suffering, which acts as a motivation to advance, and free will, which enables humans to act on this impulse. It is important to note here that Buddhism holds that even the divine beings, despite their power, are subject to the laws of *samsara*.

Karma. This term literally means “act” or “deed,” and is, as noted in Chapter 1, a concept shared with Hinduism. *Karma* is the linchpin of the whole religious system, in that it is *karma* that determines the quality of each rebirth, and also that which keeps the individual in *samsara*. On its most basic level, *karma* is the natural law of cause and effect, inherent in the very structure of the world, a cumulative system in which good acts produce good results, and bad acts, bad results. Beings are then reborn in good or bad realms, depending on their cumulative *karma* in each birth. *Karma* is frequently described in Buddhist texts as being a seed, or *phalam*, which will eventually grow fruit, the quality and abundance of which is, naturally, dependent on what sort of seed was sown.

The Buddhist understanding of *karma*, though, further stipulates that it is not just the act that determines the karmic result, but also the motivation behind the act. Thus, good acts done for the wrong reason produce negative karmic results, and, likewise, bad acts that might have been done for good reasons (or accidentally) do not necessarily produce negative karmic results. Indeed, Buddhism holds

that bad thoughts are every bit as detrimental as bad actions.

Negative *karma* is most typically created through intentionally harming other beings and through greed. Likewise, positive *karma* is most easily created through compassionate acts and thoughts and through giving selflessly (which is, ultimately, motivated by compassion).

Impermanence. The doctrine of impermanence, or *anitya*, is rooted in the three visions that prompted Siddhartha to abandon his life in the palace. What he realized, when he saw old age, disease, and death, is that all beings are in a fundamental state of flux and, ultimately, decay. This is, in an important sense, a basic corollary to the reality of *samsara*—the human being, just as the world, is constantly evolving, decaying, and reforming. Furthermore, it is due to the failure to recognize this flux that beings suffer, because they grasp on to that which is impermanent—life, love, material objects, and so on—wishing it will last. The Buddha condenses this basic idea in a simple pronouncement: “Whatever is impermanent is suffering.” Since everything is necessarily impermanent, then everything, ultimately, involves suffering, which he succinctly expresses in the phrase *sarvam duhkham*, “everything is suffering.”

No Self. The doctrine of no self, or *anatman*, is frequently misunderstood in the West. The Buddha does not mean that human beings have no personality, but rather that because everything in the world is impermanent, there can be no permanent self. In this way, Buddhism significantly breaks from Hindu doctrine, which holds that there does

exist a permanent self that is reborn time and time again in *samsara*. But if there is no permanent self, what is it that is reborn? Karmic residue alone. In his second sermon, the Buddha explains that what we think of as “the self” is only a collection of personality traits,

or *skandhas* (Pali, *khandhas*). They create the impression that there are both objects to be perceived and a person to perceive the objects, when in fact all of these objects are impermanent, constantly changing.

Personalities in Buddhism 3.2

BUDDHAGHOSA

Buddhaghosa was one of the most prolific commentators on the Pali Canon, and his works fill some thirty volumes. Little, however, is actually known about his life and activities. According to the *Mahavamsa*, the mytho-historic chronicle of Sri Lanka, Buddhaghosa was born into a brahmin family near Bodhgaya, in northeast India, sometime around 400 C.E. He converted to Buddhism early in his life, and joined the *sangha*. As a monk, he gained considerable fame for his scholarly achievements. At the suggestion of one of his teachers, he traveled to Sri Lanka to study the Sinhalese commentaries on the Buddha's teachings. He took up residence at the Mahavihara monastery in Sri Lanka, and devoted his life to explicating the Pali Canon. He wrote on the *Vinaya* (monastic discipline), on the *Sutra* literature (the sayings of the Buddha), and also on the *Abhidharma* (higher philosophy). His commentaries became the standard for later Buddhists, and essentially defined the ways in which both monks and scholars have understood the texts of the Theravada school of Buddhism. Virtually all subsequent commentators on the Pali Canon were influenced by Buddhaghosa's interpretations.

The *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purity) is Buddhaghosa's most famous work, a book that remains the most influential of all Buddhist works. The *Visuddhimagga* is divided into three sections, roughly equivalent to the three divisions of the Path. It begins with a description and explication of *sila*, ethics or morality, then moves to a detailed discussion of *samadhi*, concentration or meditation, and then to an intricate analysis of *panna*, wisdom.

One of the clearest expressions of this basic Buddhist idea is contained in a conversation between the monk Nagasena and King Milinda, from the Pali text *Milindapanha* (See From a

Classic Text 3.3). Nagasena uses the example of a chariot to illustrate no self, pointing out to Milinda that although one can point to, see, and ride a chariot, it only exists in so far as it

is a collection of parts—axles, wheels, reins, and so on—and that since no single part can be called “the chariot,” there is no essential, independent thing called a chariot, just as there is no essential, independent self.

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 3.3

The Milindapanha (Questions of King Milinda) is one of the most important noncanonical Pali texts. It records a lengthy dialogue between a Buddhist monk named Nagasena and the Greek king Milinda. Milinda poses a series of questions to Nagasena that address what appear to be contradictions in Buddhist doctrine, and Nagasena gives clear, concise answers, marked by similes and analogies that make even the most complex of Buddhist doctrines accessible. In the following passage, which contains one of the most well known similes in all of Buddhism, Milinda questions Nagasena about the concept of anatta, or no self.

Now Milinda the king went up to where the venerable Nagasena was, and addressed him with the greetings and compliments of friendship and courtesy, and took his seat respectfully apart. And Nagasena reciprocated his courtesy, so that the heart of the king was propitiated.

And Milinda began by asking, “How is your Reverence known, and what, Sir, is your name?”

“I am known as Nagasena, O king, and it is by that name that my brethren in the faith address me. But although parents, O king, give such a name as Nagasena, or Surasena, or Virasena, or Sihasena, yet this, Sire,—Nagasena and so on—is only a generally understood term, a designation in common use. For there is no permanent individuality (no soul) involved in the matter.”

Then Milinda called upon the Yonakas and the brethren to witness: “This Nagasena says there is no permanent individuality (no soul) implied in his name. Is it now even possible to approve him in that?” And turning to Nagasena, he said: “If, most reverend Nagasena, there be no permanent individuality (no soul) involved in the matter, who is it, pray, who gives to you members of the Order your robes and food and lodging and necessities for the sick? Who is it who enjoys such things when given? Who is it who lives a life of righteousness? Who is it who devotes himself to meditation? Who is it who attains to the goal of the Excellent Way, to the Nirvana of Arahatsip? And who is it who destroys living creatures? who is it who takes what is not his own? who is it who lives an evil life of worldly lusts, who speaks lies, who drinks strong drink, who (in a word) commits any one of the five sins which work out their bitter fruit even in this life? If that be so there is neither merit nor demerit; there is neither doer nor causer of good or evil deeds; there is neither fruit nor result of good or evil Karma. —If, most reverend Nagasena, we are to think that were a man to kill you there would be no murder, then it follows that there are no real masters or teachers in your Order, and that your ordinations are void.—

You tell me that your brethren in the Order are in the habit of addressing you as Nagasena. Now what is that Nagasena? Do you mean to say that the hair is Nagasena?"

"I don't say that, great king."

"Or the hairs on the body, perhaps?"

"Certainly not."

"Or is it the nails, the teeth, the skin, the flesh, the nerves, the bones, the marrow, the kidneys, the heart, the liver, the abdomen, the spleen, the lungs, the larger intestines, the lower intestines, the stomach, the faeces, the bile, the phlegm, the pus, the blood, the sweat, the fat, the tears, the serum, the saliva, the mucus, the oil that lubricates the joints, the urine, or the brain, or any or all of these, that is Nagasena?"

And to each of these he answered no.

"Is it the outward form then (Rupa) that is Nagasena, or the sensations (Vedana), or the ideas (Sañña), or the confections (the constituent elements of character, Samkhara), or the consciousness (Vigñāna), that is Nagasena?"

And to each of these also he answered no.

"Then is it all these Skandhas combined that are Nagasena?"

"No! great king."

"But is there anything outside the five Skandhas that is Nagasena?"

And still he answered no.

"Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no Nagasena. Nagasena is a mere empty sound. Who then is the Nagasena that we see before us? It is a falsehood that your reverence has spoken, an untruth!"

And the venerable Nagasena said to Milinda the king: "You, Sire, have been brought up in great luxury, as befits your noble birth. If you were to walk this dry weather on the hot and sandy ground, trampling under foot the gritty, gravelly grains of the hard sand, your feet would hurt you. And as your body would be in pain, your mind would be disturbed, and you would experience a sense of bodily suffering. How then did you come, on foot, or in a chariot?"

"I did not come, Sir, on foot. I came in a carriage."

"Then if you came, Sire, in a carriage, explain to me what that is. Is it the pole that is the chariot?"

"I did not say that."

"Is it the axle that is the chariot?"

"Certainly not."

"Is it the wheels, or the framework, or the ropes, or the yoke, or the spokes of the wheels, or the goad, that are the chariot?"

And to all these he still answered no.

"Then is it all these parts of it that are the chariot?"

"No, Sir."

"But is there anything outside them that is the chariot?"

And still he answered no.

"Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot. Chariot is a mere empty sound. What then is the chariot you say you came in? It is a falsehood that your Majesty has spoken, an untruth! There is no such thing as a chariot! You are king over all India, a mighty monarch. Of whom then are you afraid that you speak untruth?" And he called upon the Yonakas and the brethren to witness, saying: "Milinda the king here has said that he came by carriage. But when asked in that case to explain what the carriage was, he is unable to establish what he averred. Is it, forsooth, possible to approve him in that?"

When he had thus spoken the five hundred Yonakas shouted their applause, and said to the king: "Now let your Majesty get out of that if you can?"

And Milinda the king replied to Nagasena, and said: "I have spoken no untruth, reverend Sir. It is on account of its having all these things—the pole, and the axle, the wheels, and the framework, the ropes, the yoke, the spokes, and the goad—that it comes under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of 'chariot.'"

"Very good! Your Majesty has rightly grasped the meaning of 'chariot.' And just even so it is on account of all those things you questioned me about—the thirty-two kinds of organic matter in a human body, and the five constituent elements of being—that I come under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of 'Nagasena.' For it was said, Sire, by our Sister Vagira in the presence of the Blessed One:

"Just as it is by the condition precedent of the co-existence of its various parts that the word 'chariot' is used, just so is it that when the Skandhas are there we talk of a 'being.'"

"Most wonderful, Nagasena, and most strange. Well has the puzzle put to you, most difficult though it was, been solved. Were the Buddha himself here he would approve your answer. Well done, well done, Nagasena!"

(*The Questions of King Milinda*. Translated by T. W. Rhys Davids. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 35. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1890, 40–45.)

Conditioned Arising, or Pratityasamutpada. This is often called the "chain of becoming," which is broken into twelve links, and is one of the most important Buddhist doctrines. About this, the Buddha's disciple Sariputta says, "Whoever understands conditioned arising understands the *dharma*." This is a more elaborate understanding of *karma* and

samsara, a vision of cause and effect in which everything in the world is dependent on some other thing for its existence, and is succinctly expressed in this simple formula: "When this is, that is / This arising, that arises / When this is not, that is not / This ceasing, that ceases." In other words, one thing begets another. Birth begets life, which begets decay, which



FIGURE 3.2 *The Mahaniparinirvana.* This schist relief panel depicts the Buddha's physical passing from this world. The grieving figures that surround the dying Buddha include princes, beggars and lay-followers. In front of the couch on which he lies are the monk Ananda and the nun Subhadra.

begets death, which begets birth, and around and around. To get out of the circle, the chain must be broken somewhere, most efficiently

at its weakest link, ignorance, which is done by applying oneself to mastering the *dharma*.

Personalities in Buddhism 3.3

SARIPUTTA

Along with Maha Moggallana, Sariputta is generally regarded in the Pali sources as being one of the Buddha's chief disciples. He is celebrated not only for his wisdom, but also for his great compassion, particularly his willingness to minister to the ill. In the early *sangha*, Sariputta was declared by the Buddha to be the foremost possessor of

wisdom, inferior only to himself. The Buddha would frequently merely suggest a topic, and Sariputta would preach a sermon on it in detail. The "Anupada Sutta" is, essentially, a long eulogy of Sariputta by the Buddha, who praises Sariputta as the supreme example of the perfect disciple, risen to mastery and perfection in noble virtue, noble concentration, noble perception, and noble deliverance.

As with many of the Buddha's early disciples, Sariputta was born a brahmin. The Pali tradition holds that he became a Stream Winner after hearing the first two lines of a sermon spoken by Assaji. He is said to have attained arahantship after hearing the Buddha preach the "Vedangapariggaha Sutta" in Rajagriha. Because he was held in such high regard by the Buddha, the purity and integrity of the *sangha* became Sariputta's special concern. Indeed, Sariputta was particularly meticulous concerning issues of *Vinaya*; a rule had been established, for instance, that a monk could only ordain one novice, and when a boy was sent to him for ordination from a particularly pious family, he refused to ordain the boy until the Buddha himself changed the rule.

In the Pali literature, Sariputta is described as being especially attached to Rahula, the Buddha's son. It is Sariputta who gives Rahula higher ordination, and trains him in meditation. Another story tells that when the Buddha's wife, Yasodhara, became ill, Rahula went to Sariputta who, because he was adept at caring for the ill, knew exactly what medicine to give her. There are several other instances in which Sariputta ministers to the ill: for instance, when the layman Anathapindika became sick, Sariputta, along with Ananda, visited him and delivered the "Anathapindikovada Sutta." When Anathapindika died, he was reborn in the Tushita heaven as a result of the wisdom he had received.

Sariputta died some months before the Buddha. One story relates that when he realized his death was imminent, he took leave of the Buddha and returned to the village where he was born. There he found his mother, who professed no faith in the Buddha's teachings. Sariputta, however, out of his compassion, taught her the *dharma* as he lay dying, and she became a Stream Winner. He then called all of the other monks together, and asked if there was anything he had done to offend them over the last forty years. They assured him that there was nothing to forgive, and he attained *nirvana*.

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 3.4

The following text is from the Adittapariyaya Sutta, which is in the Samyutta Nikaya of the Pali Canon, and is typically called the Fire Sermon. It is one of the best known of the Buddha's sermons, simply and powerfully describing the effects of greed, hatred, and delusion. In the sermon, which was delivered in Gaya, to a group of fire-worshipping ascetics, the Buddha uses the metaphor to implicitly criticize the Vedic practice of fire-sacrifice—the dominant form of religion at the time—and at the same time deliver a powerful message that through meditation and concentration one can put out this consuming fire by cultivating a dispassionate aversion to the sensual pleasures of the world, pleasures that create greed and attachment.

Then The Blessed One, having dwelt in Uruvela as long as he wished, proceeded on his wanderings in the direction of Gaya Head, accompanied by a great congregation of priests, a thousand in number, who had all of them aforetime been monks with matted hair. And there in Gaya, on Gaya Head, The Blessed One dwelt, together with the thousand priests.

And there The Blessed One addressed the priests: "All things, O priests, are on fire. And what, O priests, are all these things which are on fire?

"The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, that also is on fire.

"And with what are these on fire?

"With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire.

"The ear is on fire; sounds are on fire; . . . the nose is on fire; odors are on fire; . . . the tongue is on fire; tastes are on fire; . . . the body is on fire; things tangible are on fire; . . . the mind is on fire; ideas are on fire; . . . mind-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the mind are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the mind, that also is on fire.

"And with what are these on fire?

"With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire.

"Perceiving this, O priests, the learned and noble disciple conceives an aversion for the eye, conceives an aversion for forms, conceives an aversion for eye-consciousness, conceives an aversion for the impressions received by the eye; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, for that also he conceives an aversion. Conceives an aversion for the ear, conceives an aversion for sounds, . . . conceives an aversion for the nose, conceives an aversion for odors, . . . conceives an aversion for the

tongue, conceives an aversion for tastes, . . . conceives an aversion for the body, conceives an aversion for things tangible, . . . conceives an aversion for the mind, conceives an aversion for ideas, conceives an aversion for mind-consciousness, conceives an aversion for the impressions received by the mind; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the mind, for this also he conceives an aversion. And in conceiving this aversion, he becomes divested of passion, and by the absence of passion he becomes free, and when he is free he becomes aware that he is free; and he knows that rebirth is exhausted, that he, has lived the holy life, that he has done what it behooved him to do, and that he is no more for this world.”

Now while this exposition was being delivered, the minds of the thousand priests became free from attachment and delivered from the depravities.

(Henry Clarke Warren. *Buddhism in Translations*. Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1896, 351–353.)

The Formation of the Monastic Community

After his enlightenment, the Buddha traveled almost without stop throughout India for the next forty years, sharing the *dharma* and gathering followers. He did, however, stay in one place for three months out of every year, during the monsoon season. This period, known later as the “rain season retreat,” became an essential element in the formation not only of Buddhist monasticism, but also of the Buddhist lay community. Monks settled in small communities throughout India, debating amongst themselves, establishing a formal religious canon and an accepted body of religious practices, and sharing the Buddha’s teachings with the laypeople. The laity, in turn, supported the monks materially by providing them with shelter, food, robes, and alms bowls.

Toward the end of his life, the Buddha instructed his followers that no single person

or group of people could hold authority over the community of monks and laypersons. Rather, the authority was to be shared by all, and was to be based on the *dharma* that he had taught. In one of the most emotionally powerful moments in all of Buddhism, recorded in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the Buddha makes this point to his chief disciple and companion, Ananda.

At the age of eighty, the Buddha decided, having made known his *dharma* completely, to pass out of this world in three months’ time. Ananda, who had been his faithful companion for forty years, learned that his teacher’s death was imminent, and was distraught. Indeed, in some versions of the story, Ananda is beside himself with grief, found alone in the monastery, desolate, sobbing. The Buddha called him and asked why he was so sad, and Ananda replied: “Alas! I am still but a learner, one who has more work to do. And the Teacher is about to pass away from me—he who is so compassionate to

me!" Ananda here is expressing several layers of distress, not the least of which is the sheer emotion of losing a dear companion. What is perhaps most emphasized in the passage, though, is Ananda's fear that without the present Buddha there to teach and guide him, he will have no chance to attain *nirvana*. The

Buddha, however, assures him that he has left the teachings, the *dharma*, and that is all that one needs. He tells Ananda that he and all the other monks must now be "lights unto themselves," by which he means that the *dharma* is there to guide them, but they and they only are responsible for their spiritual progress.

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 3.5

This is a passage from the Dhammapada, a short canonical Pali text, which consists of 423 verses grouped into 26 chapters. The text seems to have been intended as a kind of catechism, since it could easily have been learned by heart, and presents a basic overview of the Buddha's sayings, addressing fundamental issues such as, in the prior passage, thirst, or grasping. It continues to be one of the most popular of all Buddhist texts. This passage describes the characteristics that a monk, or bhikhu, should embody, as the embodiment of a person following the Buddha's teachings.

Chapter XXV: The Bhikshu (Mendicant)

360. Restraint in the eye is good, good is restraint in the ear, in the nose restraint is good, good is restraint in the tongue.

361. In the body restraint is good, good is restraint in speech, in thought restraint is good, good is restraint in all things. A Bhikshu, restrained in all things, is freed from all pain.

362. He who controls his hand, he who controls his feet, he who controls his speech, he who is well controlled, he who delights inwardly, who is collected, who is solitary and content, him they call Bhikshu.

363. The Bhikshu who controls his mouth, who speaks wisely and calmly, who teaches the meaning and the law, his word is sweet.

364. He who dwells in the law, delights in the law, meditates on the law, follows the law, that Bhikshu will never fall away from the true law.

365. Let him not despise what he has received, nor ever envy others: a mendicant who envies others does not obtain peace of mind.

366. A Bhikshu who, though he receives little, does not despise what he has received, even the gods will praise him, if his life is pure, and if he is not slothful.

367. He who never identifies himself with name and form, and does not grieve over what is no more, he indeed is called a Bhikshu.

368. The Bhikshu who acts with kindness, who is calm in the doctrine of Buddha, will reach the quiet place (Nirvâna), cessation of natural desires, and happiness.

369. O Bhikshu, empty this boat! if emptied, it will go quickly; having cut off passion and hatred thou wilt go to Nirvâna.

370. Cut off the five (senses), leave the five, rise above the five. A Bhikshu, who has escaped from the five fetters, he is called Oghatinna, "saved from the flood."

371. Meditate, O Bhikshu, and be not heedless! Do not direct thy thought to what gives pleasure that thou mayest not for thy heedlessness have to swallow the iron ball (in hell), and that thou mayest not cry out when burning, "This is pain."

372. Without knowledge there is no meditation, without meditation there is no knowledge: he who has knowledge and meditation is near unto Nirvâna.

373. A Bhikshu who has entered his empty house, and whose mind is tranquil, feels a more than human delight when he sees the law clearly.

374. As soon as he has considered the origin and destruction of the elements (khandha) of the body, he finds happiness and joy which belong to those who know the immortal (Nirvâna).

375. And this is the beginning here for a wise Bhikshu: watchfulness over the senses, contentedness, restraint under the law; keep noble friends whose life is pure, and who are not slothful.

376. Let him live in charity, let him be perfect in his duties; then in the fulness of delight he will make an end of suffering.

377. As the Vassika plant sheds its withered flowers, men should shed passion and hatred, O ye Bhikshus!

378. The Bhikshu whose body and tongue and mind are quieted, who is collected, and has rejected the baits of the world, he is called quiet.

379. Rouse thyself by thyself, examine thyself by thyself, thus self-protected and attentive wilt thou live happily, O Bhikshu!

380. For self is the lord of self, self is the refuge of self; therefore curb thyself as the merchant curbs a good horse.

381. The Bhikshu, full of delight, who is calm in the doctrine of Buddha will reach the quiet place (Nirvâna), cessation of natural desires, and happiness.

382. He who, even as a young Bhikshu, applies himself to the doctrine of Buddha, brightens up this world, like the moon when free from clouds.

(*The Dhammapada*. Translated by F. Max Müller. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 10. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881, 86-88.)

Personalities in Buddhism 3.4

ANANDA

Ananda was the first cousin of the Buddha—he was said to have been born on the same day—and one of his most famous disciples. Ananda is said to have entered the *sangha* the year after the Buddha attained enlightenment. Initially, the Buddha did not have the same personal attendants at all times, but eventually declared that he was getting old and wanted a monk as his permanent companion, one who would respect his wishes in every way. Ananda was chosen because of his intense loyalty, and he accompanied the Buddha on most of his wanderings for over twenty-five years. Ananda is the Buddha's interlocutor in many canonical dialogues. He is also the key figure in an important episode recorded in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Pali text in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, which records the Buddha's final days and his death. Upon learning of the Buddha's imminent death, Ananda is beside himself with grief, and worries that he will make no further progress on the Path without the Buddha as his teacher. The Buddha tells him that he should not grieve, that he should not be attached to the Buddha's person. Rather, the Buddha tells him that he has left his disciples the teachings, the *dharma*, which is all that they need to attain enlightenment.

In the list of disciples given in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, Ananda is mentioned five times, more than any other disciple, and is celebrated for his keen memory—which, according to the tradition, allows him to remember all of the Buddha's teachings—and his exemplary ethical conduct and service to others.

Ananda also played a key role in allowing women to become nuns (*bhikkhuni*). When Pajāpati Gotami petitioned the Buddha to allow women to enter the *sangha*, the Buddha refused. When Ananda found them dejected at the Buddha's refusal, he went to the Buddha and asked him to grant the women's request. The Buddha refused, but Ananda did not give up. He asked three times, and each time the Buddha refused. Finally, he asked if women were even capable of making progress on the Path, and the Buddha said they were, and eventually changed his mind and allowed women to enter the *sangha*.

According to various sources, at the first Buddhist council, held shortly after the Buddha's death, Ananda had not yet attained enlightenment, and was thus initially excluded from the council. Ananda, however, applied himself with great vigor, and meditated until, much to the astonishment of the other monks, he attained enlightenment just prior to their meeting. At the first council, which was formed in order to record the Buddha's teachings, Ananda played a key role, chosen to recite large portions of

the actual sermons, the *Dhamma Pitaka* portion of the Pali Canon, that the Buddha had delivered during his life. Ananda began each recitation with the phrase "Thus have I heard," to indicate that he was merely repeating the Buddha's teachings, exactly as he had heard them.

The earliest community of monks, the *sangha*, was initially the assembly of the Buddha's immediate disciples and was a loosely knit group of ascetics who lived a simple life focused on understanding—and, as the following paragraph shows, remembering—the Buddha's teachings, and on practicing meditation. From what the early texts say, these early monks required very little to live: a set of robes (traditionally made out of discarded cloth) and a needle for sewing them, a begging bowl, a belt, a razor for shaving their heads, a water strainer (to prevent the accidental ingestion of insects, which, because it involves harming another living being, would lead to the generation of negative *karma*), and a walking staff. They lived a life of wandering, modeled on the Buddha himself, moving from town to town in order to prevent personal and emotional attachments, begging for their sustenance and, in return, offering up discussions of the Buddha's teachings.

In the early decades after the Buddha's death, before his teachings were committed to writing, the monks must have made great efforts to memorize these teachings. They did so by systematically organizing the teachings into groups, which were eventually gathered into three sets of what the tradition regards as the Buddha's actual words—although it is doubtful that any of the texts are not marked

by embellishment. These are known collectively as the *Tripitaka* (Pali, *Tipitika*): the Discipline (*Vinaya*), Teachings (*Sutra*), and Advanced Doctrine (*Abhidharma*). As these collections were being formed orally, though, frequent debates arose among the different groups of monks as to both the contents of these discourses as well as their significance. Furthermore, new situations, which had not been explicitly addressed by the Buddha, arose, leading to the need for new rules, which also led to disagreements. Thus, as much as the idea that the Buddha's teachings were the ultimate authority created a fundamentally egalitarian religious community, it also, after the Buddha's death, opened the way for both productive debate and disagreement about the meaning and significance of the teachings that he had left behind.

These debates often led to schisms within the community, which were resolved in a series of councils. In fact, according to tradition, the Buddha himself had anticipated such scenarios:

O *Bhikkhus*, as long as you remain united and meet together frequently, so long the *Sangha* will continue to flourish and prosper. So long as you meet together and decide all important questions in union and harmony one with another, and do not make new and oppressive rules, hard

to keep, where I have made none, but strictly adhere to the observance of those rules which I have given you for your help and protection—so long as you do this, the *Sangha* will never decay and die out. (*Digha Nikaya* 16.6)

The tradition records that shortly after the Buddha's death, the first of these councils was held in the town of Rajagriha (Rajgir in modern Bihar) to discuss issues of doctrine and practice. In particular, some monks had begun to complain that the disciplinary rules described by the Buddha were too strict, the life he proposed too austere. In one account, a monk named Subbhada is said to have remarked, "Enough your Reverences, do not grieve, do not lament. We are well rid of this great recluse [the Buddha]. We were tormented when he said, '[T]his is allowable to you, this is not allowable to you[,] but now we will be able to do as we like and we will not have to do what we do not like.' The elder monk Mahakashyapa, overhearing the discontented young monk's words, called a meeting of the monks to address this and other issues, and they met—five hundred are said to have gathered—during the three-month period in the rainy season.

First, Mahakashyapa addressed a long series of questions to the monk Upali, an expert in monastic discipline, or *Vinaya*. His answers to these questions, which Upali had remembered (according to the tradition, exactly as the Buddha himself had spoken them), make up the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the "basket" of monastic rules and regulations. These were initially memorized by the monks and preserved orally, until they were eventually written

down (it is difficult to date this, but it would seem that this happened no earlier than the first century C.E.). This task—memorizing the *Vinaya*—must have been epic in nature, as the collection, in written form, runs hundreds of pages in length.

Mahakashyapa then addressed another series of questions to Ananda, who proceeded to recite in order each of the *nikayas*, the long "chapters," that make up the second of the collections, the *Sutra Pitaka*, and are largely concerned with issues of the *dharma*. Ananda, who was the constant companion of the Buddha, is said to have heard each of his master's *dharma* talks firsthand, and so each of these texts—sometimes referred to as "sermons," since they are *dharma* talks delivered by the Buddha on various occasions—begins with the standard Pali phrase *evam me sutam*, "thus have I heard."

Another council was held about a century later, again, to address issues of monastic discipline—a group of monks in western India, the Sthaviras ("the elders") learned that monks in the east were making changes in the monastic rules. At this council, held in the eastern city of Vaishali, the Sthaviras argued that although minor changes in the rules could be made, based on one's teachers' interpretations, the *Vinaya* was the ultimate authority and should, when possible, serve as the monastic guideline. The eastern monks did not agree. As a result of these disagreements over proper monastic behavior—and also over the doctrinal principles that were necessarily involved—the *sangha* eventually divided into two different lines of monastic

one of his laborers who would bear the karmic burden of this suffering, to which the man replied, "You yourself." At the same time, his wife had a nearly identical experience, and both decided to renounce their home life and become ascetics.

Maha Kassapa first met the Buddha after he and Bhadda Kapilani went there separate ways in search of enlightenment. On the road between Rajagriha and Nalanda, the Buddha sat down under a tree; when Kassapa arrived and saw the Buddha's radiance, he immediately recognized his enlightened status, and declared himself the Buddha's disciple. The two then set off to Rajagriha together, and along the way they stopped, and Maha Kassapa folded his robe fourfold for the Buddha to sit on. The Buddha remarked on how soft the robe was, and Maha Kassapa immediately offered it to him, taking his teacher's torn and ragged robe for his own, which became a mark of his dedication and ascetic rigor.

At the first council, Ananda mentioned that shortly before his death, the Buddha had said that it would be permitted to abolish some of the minor rules of discipline, but which rules, Ananda said he had not asked. Discussion followed, but the monks could not agree, at which point Maha Kassapa asked the assembly to consider that if they were to abolish rules arbitrarily, the lay followers would reproach them for being in a hurry to relax discipline so soon after the Buddha's death. Maha Kassapa thus suggested that the rules should be preserved intact without exception. He was thus held in great esteem by the other monks, and became the *de facto* head of the *sangha*. At the time of his death, he passed the Buddha's alms bowl—a powerful symbol of the continuity of the Buddha's teachings—to Ananda, who succeeded him as the most respected monk in the *sangha*.

Monastic Life

Although much of the *Vinaya* is concerned with monastic discipline and proper responses to disciplinary transgressions, it is also a rich source of information about the life of early Buddhist monks. Although permanent monasteries became common as the Buddhist tradition became more established in India, in the first few centuries after the Buddha's death, the life of the monk was one of wandering;

indeed, the Pali term for "becoming a monk" is *pabajja*, "to go forth." The standard way of saying one had become a monk in the texts was to say he had "gone forth from home to homelessness." The ideal monk spent much of his time in meditation, alone, under a tree or in a cave, although the monk was cautioned not to be too remote. Indeed, monks seemed to remain relatively near villages and towns for one simple reason: they were dependent on laypeople for their sustenance, and to go

too far away from human settlements was to risk starvation.

The solitary life of the wanderer was considered by the early tradition to be the most conducive to progress on the Path, precisely because it was free from distractions and allowed for the cultivation of nonattachment, but the wandering life out in the open became extremely difficult during the monsoons. In Buddhist texts, this is typically referred to as the “rainy season,” and because travel was so difficult during this period, the monks, following the model of the Buddha, tended to gather together during this period in temporary dwellings, often donated by wealthy lay patrons. This would have been a period of relative rest, certainly, and also a time for discussions about doctrinal issues, meditational techniques, and so on. Gradually, over the first few centuries after the Buddha’s death, these temporary dwellings became more established, and served as the basis for the first permanent Buddhist monasteries in India.

The formation of permanent monastic communities created in early Buddhism a basic monastic division, between those monks who settled in the monasteries (referred to in the texts as town monks) and those who continued to live as wanderers (forest monks), a division that continues to the present day. Town-dwelling monks were much more involved not only in the day-to-day activities of the monastery, but also in the life of the laypeople as well. Such monks performed a number of services for the lay community. They taught the *dharma* and instructed them in the fundamentals of the religious tradition;

they provided the opportunity for giving, an essential part of lay Buddhist religious life, by serving as a pure field of merit; and they often officiated at funerals. (See Chapter 4 for more on this topic.)

In contrast, forest monks, who are sometimes referred to as “meditation-duty monks,” lived a much simpler, much more secluded, life, focused on meditation and learning the fine points of the *dharma*. Ironically, because they were seen as being more ascetically rigorous than their village counterparts, they were frequently perceived by the laity as being purer, and thus more worthy of donations. Therefore, the very thing these monks wished to avoid—involvement with the material world—came to them in the form of gifts donated by laypeople wishing to generate greater merit by giving to a purer merit field.

In early Buddhism, there were also female monks, or nuns (the Sanscrit word *Bhikshuni* (Pali *bhikkhuni*) is simply a feminine version of the word for monk). The Buddha reluctantly admitted women into the *sangha* after his own aunt, Mahaprajapati Gautami, entreated him, with the help of Ananda, to allow for the formation of a female order. There were stricter rules for female monks, and they had extra rules; they were also considered subordinate to male monks. This is no doubt a reflection of the basic view about women in India at the time. That said, however, it is perhaps surprising that a religion that was so radically egalitarian in its understanding of who can obtain salvation—remember, the Buddha said that one must be “one’s own light,” and that salvation was entirely a matter of self-effort—would

have relegated women to what essentially amounted to a kind of second-class citizenship. And, although the female monastic order seems to have been well established in the early

period, by the second or third century C.E., the order appears to have all but died out, and the religious role of women became largely a lay affair.

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 3.6

The status of women in early Buddhism is a matter of much debate. On one hand, there is nothing in the teachings of the Buddha that theoretically indicates that women are in any way inferior to men in terms of their ability to understand and apply the dharma. As the Buddha says to his faithful disciple Ananda, shortly before he dies, the dharma is all that one needs to attain enlightenment, and progress toward that goal is purely a matter of self-effort. However, Buddhism arose in a distinctly patriarchal—and some would say misogynistic—society, in which women were viewed as essentially inferior to men. In the following passage, Ananda petitions the Buddha, on behalf of Maha Pajapati Gotami, the Buddha's aunt, to allow women to join the sangha. The Buddha eventually relents, but stipulates that women must follow an additional eight monastic rules, and, further, that the life of the dharma will be shortened as a result of women being admitted into the order of monks. Although the extra monastic rules may be interpreted as an attempt to insure the sexual purity of the monasteries, the last part is difficult to justify.

THE ADMISSION OF WOMEN TO THE ORDER

At that time The Buddha, The Blessed One, was dwelling among the Sakkas at Kapilavatthu in Banyan Park. Then drew near Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid to where The Blessed One was; and having drawn near and greeted The Blessed One, she stood respectfully at one side. And standing respectfully at one side, Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid spoke to The Blessed One as follows:

“Pray, Reverend Sir, let women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata.”

“Enough, O Gotamid, do not ask that women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata.”

And a second time . . . a third . . .

Then thought Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid, “The Blessed One permitteth not that women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata”; and she was sorrowful, sad, and tearful, and wept. And saluting The Blessed One, and keeping her right side toward him, she departed. . . .

Then Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid had her hair cut off, put on yellow garments, and with a number of Sakka women departed towards Vesali and going from place to place, she drew near

to where Vesali was, and Great Wood, and Pagoda Hall. And Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid with swollen feet, and covered with dust, sorrowful, sad, and tearful, stood weeping outside in the entrance porch.

Now the venerable Ananda saw Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid. . . . And he spoke to Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid as follows:

"Wherefore dost thou, O Gotamid, with swollen feet, and covered with dust, sorrowful, sad, and tearful, stand weeping outside in the entrance porch?"

"Because, alas! O Ananda, reverend sir, The Blessed One permitteth not that women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata."

"In that case, O Gotamid, stay thou here a moment, and I will beseech The Blessed One that women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata."

Then the venerable Ananda drew near to where The Blessed One was; and having drawn near and greeted The Blessed One, he sat down respectfully at one side. And seated respectfully at one side, the venerable Ananda spoke to The Blessed One as follows:

"Reverend Sir, here this Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid with swollen feet, and covered with dust, sorrowful, sad, and tearful, stands weeping outside in the entrance porch, and says that The Blessed One permitteth not that women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata. Pray, Reverend Sir, let women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata."

"Enough, Ananda, do not ask that women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata."

And a second time . . . a third time . . .

Then thought the venerable Ananda, "The Blessed One permitteth not that women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata; what if now, by another route, I beseech The Blessed One that women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata?"

Then the venerable Ananda spoke to The Blessed One as follows:

"Are women competent, Reverend Sir, if they retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata, to attain to the fruit of conversion, to attain to the fruit of once returning, to attain to the fruit of never returning, to attain to saintship?"

"Women are competent, Ananda, if they retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata, to attain to the fruit of conversion,

to attain to the fruit of once returning, to attain to the fruit of never returning, to attain to saintship."

"Since, then, Reverend Sir, women are competent, if they retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata, to attain to the fruit of conversion, to attain to the fruit of once returning, to attain to the fruit of never returning, to attain to saintship, consider, Reverend Sir, how great a benefactress Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid has been. She is the sister of the mother of The Blessed One, and as foster-mother, nurse, and giver of milk, she suckled The Blessed One on the death of his mother. Pray, Reverend Sir, let women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata."

"If, Ananda, Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid will accept eight weighty regulations, let it be reckoned to her as her ordination:—

"A priestess of even a hundred years' standing shall salute, rise to meet, entreat humbly, and perform all respectful offices for a priest, even if he be but that day ordained. This regulation shall be honored, esteemed, revered, and worshiped, and is not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.

"A priestess shall not keep residence in a district where there are no priests. This regulation shall be honored, esteemed, revered, and worshiped, and is not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.

"On each half-month a priestess shall await from the congregation of the priests the appointing of fast-day, and some one to come and administer the admonition. This regulation shall be honored, esteemed, revered, and worshiped, and is not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.

"At the end of residence a priestess shall invite criticism in both congregations in regard to what has been seen, or heard, or suspected. This regulation shall be honored, esteemed, revered, and worshiped, and is not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.

"If a priestess be guilty of serious sin, she shall undergo penance of half a month toward both the congregations. This regulation shall be honored, esteemed, revered, and worshiped, and is not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.

"When a female novice has spent her two years in the practice of the six rules, she shall seek ordination from both the congregations. This regulation shall be honored, esteemed, revered, and worshiped, and is not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.

"A priestess shall not revile or abuse a priest in any manner. This regulation shall be honored, esteemed, revered, and worshiped, and is not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.

"From this day on the priestesses shall not be allowed to reprove the priests officially, but the priests shall be allowed to reprove the priestesses officially. This regulation shall be honored, esteemed, revered, and worshiped, and is not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.

“If, Ananda, Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid will accept these eight weighty regulations, let it be reckoned to her as her ordination.”

“If, Ananda, women had not retired from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata, religion, Ananda, would long endure; a thousand years would the Good Doctrine abide. But since, Ananda, women have now retired from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata, not long, Ananda, will religion endure; but five hundred years, Ananda, will the Good Doctrine abide. Just as, Ananda, those families which consist of many women and few men are easily overcome by burglars, in exactly the same way, Ananda, when women retire from household life to the houseless one, under a doctrine and discipline, that religion does not long endure. Just as, Ananda, when the disease called mildew falls upon a flourishing field of rice, that field of rice does not long endure, in exactly the same way, Ananda, when women retire from household life to the houseless one, under a doctrine and discipline, that religion does not long endure. Even as, Ananda, when the disease called rust falls upon a flourishing field of sugar-cane, that field of sugar-cane does not long endure, in exactly the same way, Ananda, when women retire from household life to the houseless one, under a doctrine and discipline, that religion does not long endure. And just as, Ananda, to a large pond a man would prudently build a dike, in order that the water might not transgress its bounds, in exactly the same way, Ananda, have I prudently laid down eight weighty regulations, not to be transgressed as long as life shall last.”

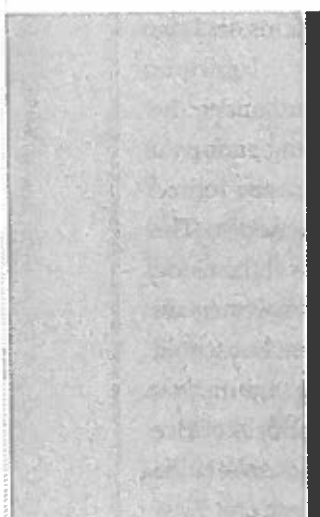
(Henry Clarke Warren. *Buddhism in Translations*. Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1896, 441–447. Translated from the *Cullavagga* of the *Vinayapitaka* of the Pali Canon.)

Personalities in Buddhism 3.6

MAHA PAJAPATI GOTAMI

According to the Pali tradition, Maha Pajapati Gotami (Maha Prajapati Gautami in Sanskrit) was Siddhartha's maternal aunt and foster mother. She is generally regarded as the first female monk, or *bhikkhuni* (Sanskrit *bhikshuni*), and the founder of the first order of Buddhist nuns. According to this tradition, she began to practice the *dharma* that the Buddha taught, and attained the state of Stream Winner. The Buddha was visiting the town of Kapilavatthu in order to settle a dispute between the Sakiyans and the Koliyans, and there preached a sermon, the *Kalahavivada Sutta*. Upon hearing this sermon, five hundred young Sakiyan men joined the *sangha*, and their wives, led by Maha Pajapati, went to the Buddha and asked permission to be ordained as nuns.





This Buddha refused, and went on to the town of Vesali. Pajapati and her companions, undaunted, had barbers shave their heads and put on monks' robes, and followed the Buddha on foot. They arrived bruised and cut and repeated their request. The Buddha again refused. This time, however, Maha Pajapati enlisted the help of the Buddha's chief disciple, Ananda, who petitioned the Buddha on her behalf. The Buddha finally agreed to allow the women to join the *sangha*, but specified that they would be required to adhere to eight additional rules, which stipulated that the nuns would be subordinate to the monks in matters of ordination and discipline.

According to the Pali tradition, after her ordination, Maha Pajapati went to the Buddha, who preached to her and gave her a special subject for meditation. She soon developed considerable insight into the *dharma*, and, along with five hundred companions, attained arahantship.

Conclusion

As the Buddha set out the doctrinal foundation of Buddhism in his first sermon (the Four Noble Truths) and its set of rituals and practices to follow for spiritual enlightenment (the Eightfold Path), his travels throughout India for nearly forty years helped establish numerous monastic communities which formed the core out of which Buddhism developed. His many disciples and followers engaged in rigorous, doctrinal commentary which fueled the continued growth of Buddhism through-

out India. When conflicts emerged over doctrinal interpretation, councils were held to produce clarity and consensus. What is remarkable is that these monastic communities were relatively egalitarian, eventually permitting both men and women to participate, making Buddhism one of the most progressive religious traditions from its origins. As we will see in the next chapter, the vitality of monastic communities coupled with urbanization would produce rapid development of the tradition throughout India and beyond.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 What is the most important part of the Eightfold Path?
- 2 What is nirvana?
- 3 Explain how karma functions in Buddhism.
- 4 Why is renunciation central to Buddhism?